

Top Hat

With a packed auditorium, the stage is set for a classic, decadent 1920's trip back in time with a single beam of light falling upon a cane, top hat and white gloves resting on a wicker chair against a backdrop of city lights reflecting the glamorous era. Jerry Travers aka Mitchell Lathbury opens the set dressed to the nines with dancing girls in tow, they clad in sparkly hot pants and matching waistcoats to whet the audience's appetite.

Lathbury is energetic, slick and holds the front line well throughout the production, which is a visual treat of luxurious costumes, and simply stunning with its art deco set, used to its full potential, filling the stage and really giving this show a palatial feel.

The bar set with heavy, dark furniture and smoky atmosphere is soon transformed with a handy screen of rolling flats at the front of the stage to a hotel bedroom with a gentle rumble of wheels, easily forgivable given the size of the set pieces, cleverly doubled up and transformed from bar to hotel room to a convincing reception, filled with bustling maids, hotel managers and customers. The tap dancing number with the maids was wonderful to watch, showcasing the talent of all the performers, no matter how small a role they had.

Horace Hardwick, Traver's right hand man, played by David Slater, gave Traver's a great character to badinage with, throwing lines to each other like old pro's, keeping the pace flowing well. Dale Tremont, played by Katie Doran is a vision in a pink, delicate dressing gown as she confronts the somewhat mischievous Travers, who is causing trouble tap dancing in the room above hers. She was almost too forgiving in her first confrontation with Travers, perhaps lacking in venom, but quickly warmed up in her annoyance when she discovered he had bribed her driver the next morning and it was he, with no experience, who was driving her horses with great difficulty, led by his infatuation of this hard-to-please young lady.

The ensuing scene in the park, pouring with rain for the number 'Isn't This a Lovely Day', gave a platform for Katie to demonstrate her natural rhythm and grace in the dance number paired with Mitchell, who complimented her well. Bates, Horace's butler, was played to its full potential and beyond by Bruce Thomson with precision in all his movement and speech, which made his well-meaning but senseless counsel from various members of his family in an array of broad accents hilarious.

Speech gave way to song smoothly as the musicians struck up, as well as providing cover for set changes, with direction by Clare Penfold, using era appropriate compositions to keep you in the moment. I did lose some of Dale's vocals to the band during 'You're Easy to Dance With', and a little in some other moments, which has always been the battle in using a live band. There were also a few lines lost in places throughout with a couple of mics fading out, but overall the balance was in favour of the actors. Hued lighting adorned the stage, picking up the glitz on costumes and set, dazzling the audience and adding further lustre.

Simon Bristoe played the flamboyant Italian dress designer Alberto Beddini, with 'Allo 'Allo's Alberto Bertorelli inspiration running through his performance. A high energy, Simon

bounced onto the stage with wonderful enthusiasm and life and provided plenty of laughs. The accent swallowed some of his speech, but was forgivable. He provided us with some great slapstick comedy in his number 'Latin's Know How', and you did wonder if he was ever going to be interrupted as he peeled his costume off piece by piece. I did feel sorry for him when he realised his marriage to Dale was a sham, but luckily he had Bate's shoulder to cry on, awkwardly given with an autonomous tap of comfort on the shoulder.

The beautiful choreography to the classic 'Let's Face the Music and Dance', and also 'Cheek to Cheek', was very well staged and sung. The male ensemble was very strong, with an agenda to steal the show all on their own with their tight-knit posse and distinct characteristics, and their well-timed choreography and chorus worked really well. The male soloist Gareth Barton in Italy had a beautiful voice, well controlled and had the ladies fawning over him in the courtyard.

A highlight for me was Robyn Gowers portrayal of the long suffering Madge Hardwick, living separately from her slightly sniffing husband in sunny Italy. With her dry wit and good sense, lines were delivered to maximum and cutting effect for David Slater to play up to. Their number 'Outside of That, I Love You', maybe reflected more long marriages than we care to think about, as they ripped chunks out of each other before admitting they are willing to put up with each other's despicable behaviour.

Overall, I did feel there was maybe a slight lacking in chemistry between our stars, possibly hindered by the fact there was a last minute cast swap, who had to learn the entire play in a much shorter length of time than his counterparts. He also has the legendary Fred Astaire to live up to; no easy feat by any means. But together, their dance numbers and duets were stunning, set against a very strong production overall, and provided a wonderful night out for those who had come to see this musical classic.

Sallie Warrington, the director, has used the strength of each cast member to full potential and brought out the best in all of them. The costumes and set sourced were perfect and you could not have asked for more. The story itself was not my personal favourite, but to many who are fans of the era of the age of musicals, this was a success. I felt the actors had really developed the characters fully, even the non-speaking roles, and on reflection it was a hearty production which the cast and crew should be proud of.

Katherine Tokley, NODA